



Ensuring safety while stretching gas tax dollars further

Congratulations to Sens. Jim Horn (R) and Mary Margaret Haugen (D) and Reps. Ed Murray (D) and Doug Ericksen (R) for leading the way in passing a transportation package that will benefit our state as a whole. The “nickel fund” they created can be a tremendous success for all of us working to bring Washington’s transportation system into the 21st century, which ultimately will make it a better place in which to do business.

The goal of the “nickel fund” was to focus project dollars on highways of statewide significance by addressing safety, and doing that with greater accountability. Accountability means that all projects on the list will be completed within a 10-year time frame and the increased portion of the newly implemented tax package will be eliminated after the bonds are paid off.

The project list was a combination of local and statewide needs. Regional Department of Transportation (DOT) offices submitted priority lists to the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) headquarters in Olympia. Our own local DOT submitted a list of 11 candidate projects in January. WSDOT headquarters ultimately selected the final project list with direction from the Legislature, giving safety-related projects priority.

The political backlash in north central Washington of the final project list has been tremendous, and rightfully so.

Safety is an issue five miles southeast of Leavenworth, near Dryden at the intersection of U.S. 2 and U.S. 97, locally known as the “Big Y” interchange. The reason this project competes so well as a safety project is because of the accident history. From 1996 through 2000, there were three accidents involving fatalities and two accidents involving disabling injuries at the “Big Y” location. Constructing a new interchange is expected to eliminate potential accidents.

Given the safety concerns and a recognition that the needs of the state as a whole as well as our region needed to be taken into account, I voted for the final package that provides almost \$25 million to build a new interchange at the “Big Y.” I am not entirely satisfied, however, with that funding package for our region. Many residents of our area, including me, the two 12th District representatives, the North Central Regional Transportation Planning Organization, the Wenatchee Valley Transportation Council, county engineers and local mayors would have preferred to see improvements made to the approaches at both ends of the Sen. George Sellar Bridge in the Wenatchee area, which is also of statewide significance as a freight route.

Despite all this, now is not the time to point fingers or wring our hands in frustration over the choice of projects for our area. We should view this as an opportunity.

Although making a change to a project list that has already been approved by the Legislature is no small feat, I believe it can be done, and my efforts are already under way to accomplish that change. Now is the time to show continued leadership by initiating a process for change. We all know that unforeseen circumstances alter even the best-laid plans, and by creating “criteria for change,” we can set up a process to make modifications in project lists if needed.

Once a framework for this process is laid out, it could also be employed in other parts of the state as necessary changes arise. The process will provide assurances to the public that changes to the “nickel plan” must meet high standards, and will be made on a sound basis using the best possible information. The savings from this process could be applied to additional projects with broad regional support. Setting up this process now, I believe, would serve to restore the public trust by spending tax dollars as efficiently and effectively as possible.

A test case can be initiated in our area with the ultimate goal of transferring a majority of project funds from the “Big Y” interchange to the Sellar Bridge. As an alternative to proceeding with the current plan, I will be asking the chairmen of the Senate and House transportation committees to direct WSDOT to establish a Project Re-evaluation Oversight Team. This PRO-Team should be comprised of the WSDOT’s regional staff and local county engineers and planners to provide a range of alternatives to meet the safety problems at that site. The PRO-Team would analyze the cost-benefit of the proposed investment at the “Big Y” and report to the Legislature with the alternatives to the original project considered.

It is my firm belief that the state could significantly improve the safety of the “Big Y” interchange with an investment as small as \$3 million, which includes the addition of stoplights and turn lanes rather than building a whole new interchange. This would free up funding to be transferred to the Sellar Bridge projects. This plan would keep the \$25 million in the 12th District for highly needed safety and improvement projects while stretching gas tax dollars further.

Whether we make this change by passing a bill during the special session or in the 2004 supplemental transportation budget is not important. What is important is that we move forward by addressing safety at the “Big Y” and transfer the savings to the east side of the Sellar Bridge. If we are to restore the public’s trust in government, we must be sensible, not waste time and put taxpayer dollars to the most efficient and effective use possible.

For further details, please contact my Olympia office at (360) 786-7622.

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Sen. Parlette serves the 12th Legislative District, which includes Chelan and Douglas counties and parts of Grant and Okanogan counties.

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